

Message Text

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ORIGIN SS-25

INFO OCT-01 ISO-00 SSO-00 NSCE-00 /026 R

DRAFTED BY NEA/ARP:PDMOLINEAUX:JR

APPROVED BY NEA/RA:SEPALMER, JR.

PM/ISO:GCHURCHILL (INFO)

NSC:RBOAKLEY (SUBS)

DOD/ISA:GSICK (INFO)

NEA:AGRIFFIN

S/S:AOTTO

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O R 080257Z APR 76

FM SECSTATE WASHDC

TO AMEMBASSY LONDON IMMEDIATE

INFO AMEMBASSY JIDDA

AMEMBASSY MUSCAT

AMEMBASSY TEHRAN

S E C R E T STATE 084477

EXDIS; LONDON FOR KINSOLVING

E.O. 11652: XGDS-1

TAGS: PFOR, MARR, MPOL, MU, UK, US

SUBJECT: INITIAL INFORMAL US-UK DISCUSSION OF MASIRAH
ISLAND

REF: LONDON 4978

1. GIVEN URGENCY OF QUESTION OF U.S. INTEREST IN MASIRAH
GENERATED BY BRITISH INTENTION TO INFORM SULTAN QABOOS BY
MID-APRIL OF HMG INTENTION TO WITHDRAW RAF FROM MASIRAH
AIRBASE NOT LATER THAN END OF 1976 (REFTEL), INTERAGENCY
MEETING CHAIRED BY NSC WAS HELD APRIL 6. PARTICIPANTS
AGREED USG COULD NOT APPROACH MASIRAH QUESTION IN ISOLATION
FROM OTHER SECURITY FACTORS BEING CONSIDERED IN CURRENT
STUDY OF PERSIAN GULF POLICY. UPSHOT WAS DECISION TO

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ATTEMPT TO PERSUADE HMG TO DELAY APPROACH TO SULTAN FOR FEW

MORE WEEKS- IT WAS ALSO AGREED THAT DRAWING OUT HMG ON SEVERAL SPECIFICS PERTAINING TO DECISION TO WITHDRAW, INCLUDING HMG PLANS FOR FUTURE OF FACILITIES ON MASIRAH OTHER THAN RAF BASE, WOULD BE HELPFUL AS WE SOUGHT TO CRYSTALIZE OUR OPTIONS.

2. AT NSC MEETING IT WAS NOTED THAT CURRENT STATE OF POLICY REVIEW INDICATED SEVERAL POSSIBLE U.S. USES OF MASIRAH IN ADDITION TO OCCASIONAL LANDING RIGHTS FOR RECONNAISSANCE AND LOGISTIC AIRCRAFT CONSIDERED IN EARLY 1975. THERE ARE ALTERNATIVE POSSIBILITIES FOR SERVICING THESE ADDITIONAL REQUIREMENTS, BUT EVEN IN ABSENCE OF POSSIBLE FUTURE CONTINUOUS U.S. USES OF MASIRAH, IT DESIRABLE FROM USG POINT OF VIEW THAT AIRFIELD BE KEPT OPERATIONAL FOR CONTINGENCIES. A PERMANENT U.S. MILITARY PRESENCE ON MASIRAH, AT ANY LEVEL, WOULD ENCOUNTER SERIOUS CONGRESSIONAL CONCERN. DOD PRELIMINARILY ESTIMATES COST OF MAINTAINING EXISTING RAF FACILITIES AND SERVICES AT UPWARDS OF TEN MILLION DOLLARS PER YEAR, WITH APPROXIMATELY 200 PERSONNEL REQUIRED. MEETING ALSO NOTED AS ALTERNATIVES POSSIBLE U.S. ACCESS TO OMANI FACILITIES AT SALALLAH OR, ASSUMING USG REMAINED INTERESTED IN MASIRAH, PARTICIPANTS AGREED IT WOULD BE DESIRABLE FOR OUR USE OF ISLAND TO BE MADE UNDER AEGIS OF CONTINUED BRITISH PRESENCE, WITH POSSIBLE USG COST-SHARING, SHOULD THIS BE OF INTEREST TO HMG.

3. ON APRIL 7, UK EMBASSY REPRESENTATIVES RICHARD MUIR AND JOSEPH MILLINGTON MET WITH STATE REPRESENTATIVES PALMER (NEA/RA), CHURCHILL (PM/ISO), AND MOLINEAUX (NEA/ARP) FOR INFORMAL EXPLORATORY DISCUSSION. PALMER REVIEWED BACKGROUND OF US-UK CONSIDERATIONS CONCERNING MASIRAH. WE APPRECIATE HMG'S FOREBEARANCE OVER PAST YEAR. HMG'S INTENTION TO INFORM SULTAN QABOOS SOON OF HMG DECISION TO WITHDRAW RAF FROM MASIRAH BY END OF 1976 IMPACTS ON A BROAD SECURITY POLICY STUDY OF GULF AREA NOW IN PROGRESS. WE FIND OURSELVES IN SOMEWHAT OF A CHICKEN-AND-EGG SITUATION: OUR "REQUIREMENTS" FOR MASIRAH WILL IN PART DEPEND ON WHETHER OTHER LOCATIONS ARE AVAILABLE FOR CERTAIN ACTIVITIES; THE SUITABILITY OF MASIRAH, AS COMPARED WITH

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ALTERNATIVE LOCATIONS, WILL DEPEND IN PART ON THE NATURE OF THE BRITISH PRESENCE REMAINING ON THE ISLAND. WE HAD THUS FAR IDENTIFIED TWO SPECIFIC US SECURITY INTERESTS: (A) THE OCCASIONAL USE OF MASIRAH AIRFIELD BY US LOGISTICAL AND MARITIME PATROL AIRCRAFT FOR REFUELING, WITH PERHAPS ONE OR TWO LANDINGS A MONTH, AND NO US PERSONNEL STATIONED ON THE ISLAND; (B) CONTINUED ACCESS TO PRODUCTS OF UK INTELLIGENCE FACILITY. MUIR NOTED THAT LATTER

MATTER WAS BEING HANDLED BY OUR RESPECTIVE SPECIALISTS;
HE THOUGHT THERE "SHOULD BE NO INSUPERABLE PROBLEM."

4. IN RESPONSE TO QUESTION ABOUT WHO WOULD MAINTAIN AIR-STRIP IF RAF WITHDRAWN, MUIR THOUGHT THAT THE OMANIS THEMSELVES WOULD TAKE OVER THE OPERATION, PROBABLY WITH TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE OF BRITISH CONTRACT CIVILIANS. HMG PLANS TO TURN OVER ALL "NON-WARLIKE SURPLUS" MATERIEL TO OMANI GOVERNMENT. IN ENSUING DISCUSSION PALMER ASKED TO WHAT EXTENT THE COST FACTOR WAS A DETERMINANT IN HMG'S CONSIDERATION OF WITHDRAWAL. MUIR SAID REASONS FOR "DECISION" TO WITHDRAW WERE (A) CONSONANCE WITH 1975 DEFENSE REVIEW CONCLUSIONS, AND (B) END OF DHOFAR WAR WHICH MADE WITHDRAWAL POSSIBLE IN TERMS OF UK-OMANI RELATIONS.

5. PALMER SAID IN LIGHT OF OUR CURRENT STUDY USG COULD NOT DEFINITELY STATE ITS INTEREST IN MASIRAH AT THIS TIME. THEREFORE WE WONDERED IF HMG COULD DELAY APPROACH TO QABOOS FOR A FEW WEEKS. BY END OF MAY, HOPEFULLY BEFORE, USG WOULD HAVE OFFICIAL POSITION ON MASIRAH TO DISCUSS WITH HMG. MEANWHILE, THE TIME HAD OBVIOUSLY COME TO BEGIN TO "THINK OUT LOUD TOGETHER." PALMER INDICATED THAT USG MIGHT BE INTERESTED, FOR INSTANCE, IN THE MAINTENANCE OF "A FIG LEAF" OF RAF CONTROL OF AIRFIELD, WIT; NO US PERSONNEL BEING STATIONED THERE. MUIR STRESSED HMG INTENT IS TO TAKE DOWN BRITISH FLAG ON MASIRAH. HE OPINED HMG WOULD STILL WANT TO TALK THIS MONTH TO QABOOS ABOUT "DECISION" TO WITHDRAW. UK EMBASSY WOULD, OF COURSE, CONVEY OUR REQUEST TO LONDON. IN THIS CONTEXT MUIR NOTED THAT ANNUAL US-UK "GULF TALKS" WERE BEING SCHEDULED IN WASHINGTON LATE APRIL.

6. TO QUERY ABOUT FUTURE OF BBC FACILITIES ON ISLAND,
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MILLINGTON SAID HMG HAS PROBLEM WITH MALAYSIA, WHERE BBC HAS TRANSMITTER WHICH COVERS SOME OF SAME AREA COVERED BY MASIRAH TRANSMITTER. MALAYSIAN GOVERNMENT HAS BEEN EXTENDING ONLY FOR SHORT INTERVALS PERMISSION TO MAINTAIN BBC FACILITIES, AND THUS HMG IS EXPANDING BBC FACILITIES ON MASIRAH. PALMER NOTED THAT VOA WOULD LIKE A RELAY FACILITY ON MASIRAH; WE HAD IMPRESSION BBC WAS UNENTHUSIASTIC ABOUT SHARING MASIRAH WITH A "COMPETITOR." UK EMBOFFS AGREED.

7. CHURCHILL ASKED ABOUT REPORTS THAT BRITISH WERE EXPANDING WATER DESALINIZATION AND POWER FACILITIES ON MASIRAH. MUIR SAID HE HAD NO DIRECT INFORMATION, BUT WAS UNDER IMPRESSION THAT SUCH PROJECTS WERE STRICTLY WITHIN CONTEXT OF TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE TO OMAN.

8. UK EMBOFFS DID NOT KNOW WHETHER HMG HAD DEFINITIVE PLANS RE WITHDRAWAL OF RAF PRESENCE FROM SALALLAH THIS YEAR.

9. MOLINEAUX SOUGHT BRITISH VIEWS ON POSSIBILITY OF IRANIAN OR JORDANIAN INVOLVEMENT ON MASIRAH, AND HOW OMANI GOVERNMENT MIGHT VIEW THIS. MUIR SAID HE WOULD SEEK HMG'S THOUGHTS ON THIS, AND NOTED THAT HMG WAS CONSIDERING WHEN TO TELL THE SHAH ABOUT WITHDRAWAL FROM MASIRAH.

10. MUIR ASKED HOW STRONG A USG REQUEST FOR A DELAY (BEFORE THE BRITISH TALKED WITH THE SULTAN) WE WOULD LIKE THE EMBASSY TO CONVEY. PALMER SAID WE ;STRONGLY HOPED" HMG WOULD FIND IT POSSIBLE TO DELAY A WHILE, FOR INFORMING QABOOS AT THIS TIME COULD COMPLICATE OUR NOW-URGENT POLICY APPROACH TO MASIRAH AND RELATED MATTERS. IN RESPONSE TO MUIR'S "HYPOTHETICAL" QUESTIONS ABOUT U.S. REPLACING HMG ON MASIRAH, ON USG'S SEEKING TO PERSUADE UK TO RETAIN RAF PRESENCE, PALMER INDICATED THAT AT THIS JUNCTURE WE WANTED TO KEEP ALL REASONABLE OPTIONS OPEN. WHEN PALMER AGAIN EVINCED INTEREST IN RELEVANCE OF COST FACTOR, MUIR DEEMED IT NOT VERY SIGNIFICANT. MUIR STRESSED THAT WITHDRAWAL DECISION HAD BEEN MADE AT MINISTERIAL LEVEL, AND REACTION TO OUR REQUEST FOR DELAY PROBABLY WOULD HAVE TO BE CONSIDERED AT THAT LEVEL. HE ASKED IF WE WOULD HAVE
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CLEARER VIEW OF OUR INTEREST IN MASIRAH TO DISCUSS WITH WEIR AT FORTHCOMING GULF TALKS. PALMER DEEMED IT UNLIKELY THAT REVIEW AND DISCUSSION PROCESS ON THE RELATED POLICY STUDY WOULD HAVE BEEN COMPLETED BY THEN, BUT WE SHOULD HAVE A BETTER FIX ON THE MASIRAH-RELATED ASPECTS. KISSINGER

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Message Attributes

Automatic Decaptioning: Z
Capture Date: 01 JAN 1994
Channel Indicators: n/a
Current Classification: UNCLASSIFIED
Concepts: TROOP DEPLOYMENT, MASIRAH, MEETINGS, GOVERNMENT REACTIONS, MILITARY BASE CLOSINGS
Control Number: n/a
Copy: SINGLE
Draft Date: 08 APR 1976
Decaption Date: 28 MAY 2004
Decaption Note: 25 YEAR REVIEW
Disposition Action: RELEASED
Disposition Approved on Date:
Disposition Authority: ElyME
Disposition Case Number: n/a
Disposition Comment: 25 YEAR REVIEW
Disposition Date: 28 MAY 2004
Disposition Event:
Disposition History: n/a
Disposition Reason:
Disposition Remarks:
Document Number: 1976STATE084477
Document Source: CORE
Document Unique ID: 00
Drafter: PDMOLINEAUX:JR
Enclosure: n/a
Executive Order: X1
Errors: N/A
Film Number: D760132-0291
From: STATE
Handling Restrictions: n/a
Image Path:
ISecure: 1
Legacy Key: link1976/newtext/t19760482/aaaacsay.tel
Line Count: 206
Locator: TEXT ON-LINE, ON MICROFILM
Office: ORIGIN SS
Original Classification: SECRET
Original Handling Restrictions: EXDIS
Original Previous Classification: n/a
Original Previous Handling Restrictions: n/a
Page Count: 4
Previous Channel Indicators: n/a
Previous Classification: SECRET
Previous Handling Restrictions: EXDIS
Reference: 76 LONDON 4978
Review Action: RELEASED, APPROVED
Review Authority: ElyME
Review Comment: n/a
Review Content Flags:
Review Date: 12 MAY 2004
Review Event:
Review Exemptions: n/a
Review History: RELEASED <12 MAY 2004 by BoyleJA>; APPROVED <10 SEP 2004 by ElyME>
Review Markings:

Margaret P. Grafeld
Declassified/Released
US Department of State
EO Systematic Review
04 MAY 2006

Review Media Identifier:
Review Referrals: n/a
Review Release Date: n/a
Review Release Event: n/a
Review Transfer Date:
Review Withdrawn Fields: n/a
Secure: OPEN
Status: NATIVE
Subject: INITIAL INFORMAL US-UK DISCUSSION OF MASIRAH ISLAND
TAGS: PFOR, MARR, MPOL, MU, UK, US
To: LONDON
Type: TE
Markings: Margaret P. Grafeld Declassified/Released US Department of State EO Systematic Review 04 MAY 2006